

# Ganja & Hess ([1972](#))

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**Directed by**

[Bill Gunn](#)

[Fima Noveck](#)

**Writing credits**

[Bill Gunn](#)

**Add to**

**MyMovies**Genre: [Horror \(more\)](#)

**Tagline:** Some Marriages Are Made In Heaven. Others Are Made In Hell. [\(more\)](#)

**Plot Outline:** Afer being stabbed with an ancient, germ-infested knife, a doctor's assistant finds himself with an insatiable desire for blood. [\(more\)](#)

**User Comments:** An incohesive mess [\(more\)](#)

**User Rating:** **4.8/10** (56 votes)

**Credited cast:**

[Marlene Clark](#) .... Ganja

[Duane Jones](#) .... Dr. Hess Green

rest of cast listed alphabetically

[Betty Barney](#) .... Singer

[Enrico Fales](#) .... Green's Son

[Tara Fields](#) .... Woman With Baby

[Bill Gunn](#) .... George

[Richard Harrow](#) .... Dinner guest

[John Hoffmeister](#) .... Jack

[Leonard Jackson](#).... Archie

[Mabel King](#) .... Queen of Myrthia

[Tommy Lane](#) .... Pimp

[Candece Tarpley](#) .... Girl in bar

[Betsy Thurman](#) .... Poetess  
[Sam Waymon](#) .... Reverend Williams  
([more](#))

**Also Known As:**

Black Evil (1972)  
Black Vampire (1972)  
Blackout: The Moment of Terror (1972)  
Blood Couple (1972) (cut version)  
Double Possession (1972)  
Vampires of Harlem (1972)

**Runtime:** 110 min

**Country:** [USA](#)

**Language:** [English](#)

**Color:** [Color](#)

**Certification:** [USA:R](#)

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## Ganja and Hess

Capsule by Jonathan Rosenbaum

*From the Chicago Reader*

Dr. Hess Green (Duane Jones from *Night of the Living Dead*) is a black anthropologist who develops a taste for blood after he's accidentally stabbed with a dagger from an ancient civilization. Ganja (Marlene Clark) becomes infected as well, and the two become lovers and mutual tormentors in their joint journey toward

death. Certainly the most original and intellectually ambitious of all the "blaxploitation" films of the 70s, Bill Gunn's uneven but thought-provoking 1973 horror film is better known in Europe than here; the ritualistic phantasmagoria it creates--aided and abetted by James Hinton's cinematography--lingers in the mind.

## Editorial Reviews

### **Amazon.com**

A landmark in the history of African American cinema and one of the most important films of the 1970s, *Ganja & Hess* suffered a tortured fate that nearly resulted in its extinction. Briefly released in New York City in 1973, it was originally intended to be a "blaxploitation" horror thriller, but actor-director Bill Gunn (who died in 1989) created something much more complex and artistically expressive: a vampire film starring the late Duane Jones (earlier immortalized as the hero of *Night of the Living Dead*) that never mentions the word "vampire," addressing interwoven themes of addiction, passion, class distinction, faith, and the place of blacks in a dominant white society. Unfolding on a sensual level that is better experienced than explained, the film is equal parts dream, nightmare, and existential odyssey.

Not surprisingly, a film that so daringly defied convention was hard to market, and after its failed release it was drastically re-edited and eventually released to video under no fewer than seven different titles. Fortunately, a single print of Gunn's original version survived at New York's Museum of Modern Art, its reputation rising through revival screenings until *Ganja & Hess* achieved cult status as a "lost" milestone of its decade. The DVD release preserves Gunn's original cut in superb condition (considering the film's turbulent history) and includes engaging commentary by surviving cast and crew and an insightful essay reprinted from *Video Watchdog* magazine. And while *Ganja & Hess* is certainly not for all tastes, there's no denying that its fully restored release on DVD represents an historic occasion that any cinephile should celebrate. --Jeff Shannon

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0 of 2 people found the following review helpful:

**Pitiful**, January 3, 2004

Reviewer: **[Tim Hewitt \(see more about me\)](#)** from Columbia, SC USA I had heard of this movie for so many years, first as a kid reading "Famous Monsters," then as a film buff who kept hearing and reading tales of a complex and challenging vampire film that the distributors wouldn't release. I was thrilled when I got my hands on this DVD. I must say I've liked my share of oddball, offbeat films that few others seem to connect with, and it was with that spirit that I went into "Ganja and Hess." Sadly, despite what "art" some see in it, "Ganja and Hess" is a total mess and a waste of time. It's execution is amaturish and it's plot is hopelessly muddled (except of course if you view plot as something that just interferes with the artist making his point). You could call this the "Plan 9 From Outer Space" of blaxploitation films, but that would be an insult to "Plan 9" and suggest that "Ganja and Hess" is fun in a bad movie sort of way. It's not. It's just bad. I get the idea that Ben Gunn has some sort of point to make, but by the time he gets around to making it, you're so numb you just don't care anymore. If you're looking for a good vampire film from the "blaxploitation" period, "Blacula" is coming to DVD soon. And if you're looking for art, look elsewhere. You won't find it here.

Was this review helpful to you?

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful:

**Interesting "vampire" film.,** November 17, 2002

Reviewer: [rastacat1 \(see more about me\)](#) from Whitewood, MA This is an odd movie to say the least. Dr. Hess Green (Duane Jones) acquires the "addiction" from a ceremony while travelling in Africa and becomes, basically, a vampire. Not your standard fictional vampire mind you, but someone who has a hunger for blood and cannot die. After that, all similarities with your standard vampire end. He walks in the daylight, sleeps in a bed, goes to church and does not have fangs. He lives on a large estate and has a butler and chauffeur who take care of him. There is a bit of narration from the butler who knows about the doctor's affliction, but it is mostly to get us up to speed at the beginning of the film. A ways into the film Ganja (Marlene Clark) comes to stay with Dr. Hess. She finds evidence of strange goings on and tells Hess an interesting story from her childhood. Somehow this leads to their getting married and him performing the ceremony on her to give her the same affliction he has.

There are parts of the film that have a lot of dialog and then other parts that have very little, if any. There are also some extended scenes from a gospel singing church that look more like a documentary than a fictional vampire movie. Flashback scenes are interspersed with dream sequences and at times it is difficult to tell if it is present reality or a dream. There are a few violent scenes where the doctor feeds including one at a whorehouse where he somewhat violently kills his victim and laps up the blood that has spilled. In another scene he robs a medical clinic, walking away with their supply of blood in his leather satchel.

I can't say that this is a great movie, but it is somewhat entertaining, if not a little slow. When the film was first screened

the producers were disappointed that it was not a traditional "blaxploitation" film and cut it down from 110 minutes to 78 minutes. It bombed and was soon forgotten.

All Day Entertainment released the fully restored dvd to much fanfare from fans of the movie back in 1998 and it is still in release. There is an essay from Tim Lucas and a commentary from producer Chiz Schultz, actress Marlene Clark, cinematographer James Hinton and soundtrack composer Sam Waymon. The full retail price is [X] and I am certainly glad I rented it from Netflix instead of buying it, but some collectors might consider it for their collection, mostly those interested in really offbeat, independent vampire films, or collectors of interesting black cinema (blaxploitation it is not).

Was this review helpful to you?

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful:

**Peculiar, intriguing, confusing,** May 13, 2002

Reviewer: [lgwriter49 \(see more about me\)](#) from Astoria, N.Y. United States Bill Gunn's *Ganja and Hess*, originally released in 1973, has had a checkered career, to say the least. It was chopped, slashed, re-edited, and re-released no less than FIVE times throughout the 70s and 80s with five additional titles--very likely a record. Its original length of 110 minutes was sliced down to 78 minutes by Fima Novick in the original chopped version (*Blood Couple*), but as Tim Lucas points out in his terrific essay included in this DVD release, Novick introduced a few elements missing from the original that were actually helpful in clarifying the action.

This DVD release is the full director's cut and that is all to the good. Yet this version of the film is hard to follow unless you have some backstory. For example, without knowing that the main character, a black intellectual, Hess Green, somehow came across a Myrthian dagger and then accidentally (or is it on purpose?) was scratched or stabbed with it by his assistant, George Meda (played by the director himself)--AND that this dagger's touch can bring on vampirism--you would never know how Hess got to be the way he was. The scene in which this is supposedly revealed has such vague exposition that it leaves you scratching your head trying to figure out how things got from point A to point B.

Yet the film also boasts some brilliant dream imagery, some of the best in any film from the 70s, if not since then as well. These dream scenes give the film tremendous power.

But the dream scenes are juxtaposed with other scenes that seem somewhat too long for their purpose, or that don't really go anywhere. For example, in one scene, deleted from the chopped version, Hess talks to his son--who looks to be about 13 or 14--speaking in French to him, asking him about his studies at his private school. This is no doubt meant to bring out Hess' social and intellectual standing as a man of culture and refinement. But the son is never seen in the rest of the film and the scene seems completely isolated from the rest of the movie.

In another scene, Hess visits a white woman from a trashy part of town. It's obvious what the purpose of the visit is, and this is no doubt to bring out Hess' conflicted character. This does work to some extent, in that later on, he goes to church, supposedly for absolution based on his deeds, but there is too much fragmentation of purpose working in this film to make it cohere.

It's a fascinating failure. Ganja Meda, played by Marlene Clark, is another frustratingly developed character. She discovers her

husband, George, is dead, but while suspicion definitely points to Hess as the perpetrator, she's walks around mad for a couple of minutes and then is lovey-dovey with him.

There are threads here that do fit together and make sense and cohere and there are just as many that don't. This is not an easily followed film, nor one that lacks intelligence. With greater coherence, it could have been a brilliant film. As it is, it is an intriguing, seriously flawed work that comes this close to being an amazing, resonant film.

Was this review helpful to you?

16 of 16 people found the following review helpful:

**The Rescue Of A Forgotten Classic**, June 22, 1999

Reviewer: **A viewer** An amazing lost work of African-American cinema. Filled with surreal and sensuous imagery, and a haunting performance by the late Duane Jones (Night Of The Living Dead), this may not be a film for everyone, but for the adventurous it will reward your time and patience. By virtue of rescuing this film from the obscurity in which its lived for so long, this DVD would rate 5 stars. But on top of a superb restoration and transfer, you also get an informative and impassioned commentary track, a gallery of beautiful stills, and a well-written analysis/history of the film. Taken together, this is a triumph of no small magnitude.